

Medical History

A replica of Alexander Fleming's Nobel Medal

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INTRODUCTION

Recently some Swedish friends expressed great interest in my replica of the gold medal presented to Alexander Fleming when he received the Nobel Prize for his discovery of penicillin (*fig 1*). They were equally interested in the silver border, which relates how I received the replica. It states:

A present from Lady Fleming to Lady Thomson 1956 given to Herbert Gallagher 1971

I explained that Fleming and Thomson had served in the same Royal Army Medical Corps Research Unit in France in the 1914-18 war. They had become friends and their friendship continued after the war. WWD Thomson became Professor of Medicine in Queen's University, Belfast.¹ He became very ill and was treated in a Nursing Home in London. The Flemings befriended Mrs Thomson who, having gone to London to be with her husband, was alone in a strange city. Also because of the friendship Fleming gave his first lecture on Penicillin outside London to the Ulster Medical Society when he was the Robert Campbell Orator in 1944.² He also addressed the Belfast Medical Students Association in the Great Hall



Fig 1A. Obverse of medal.



1B. Reverse of medal.

of Queen's University on the same visit. The war was still on and although travel restrictions were extremely tight Lady Fleming came with him. When on the platform of the railway station for the boat train to Larne they discovered that Fleming's slides had been left behind in the Thomson home in University Square³ (*fig 2*). The train departure was delayed until the slides had been retrieved by Thomson's chauffeur!

In 1946 Queen's University conferred on Fleming the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.

LADY THOMSON AND LADY FLEMING

When Lady Thomson was widowed she lived in Donaghadee, Co. Down, and became my patient. The relationship of my

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Fig 2. Sir Alexander and Lady Fleming on the steps of 25 University Square.

wife and myself to her became very much like that of a surrogate son and daughter-in-law. Her own son, and only child, had been killed in the Far East while serving as a Regimental Medical Officer in The Royal Army Medical Corps. Lady Thomson's gift to me included a signed photograph of Fleming (fig 3). The original is now in the office of the Head of the School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen's University, Belfast.

The Lady Fleming who gave the replica to Lady Thomson was Fleming's second wife. She had had a colourful career both before her marriage and in her widowhood. During the 1939-45 war the Germans had imprisoned her for assisting allied prisoners to escape from her native Greece. In 1947 she, Mrs Amalia Voureka, came to work, as a postgraduate student, under Fleming in St Mary's. They immediately struck up a very close rapport.

She returned to Greece to head a bacteriological department in a hospital and became a voluble critic of the various dictatorial regimes. She gave evidence in favour of thirty-four people accused of plotting to overthrow the regime of the Colonels and was convicted and imprisoned for assisting at the attempted escape from prison of the assassin of a Prime Minister. Later she was prominent in the campaign for the return the Elgin Marbles to Greece.

Fleming and she met again in 1951 and 1952 after he had been widowed and her marriage had been dissolved. They married in 1953 and unfortunately he died suddenly in 1955 aged 75.

I do not know if the second Lady Fleming and Lady Thomson ever met and if the gift was in memory of the friendship of the two families. As far as I know three copies of the medal were made. Lady Fleming brought one to Greece and the third

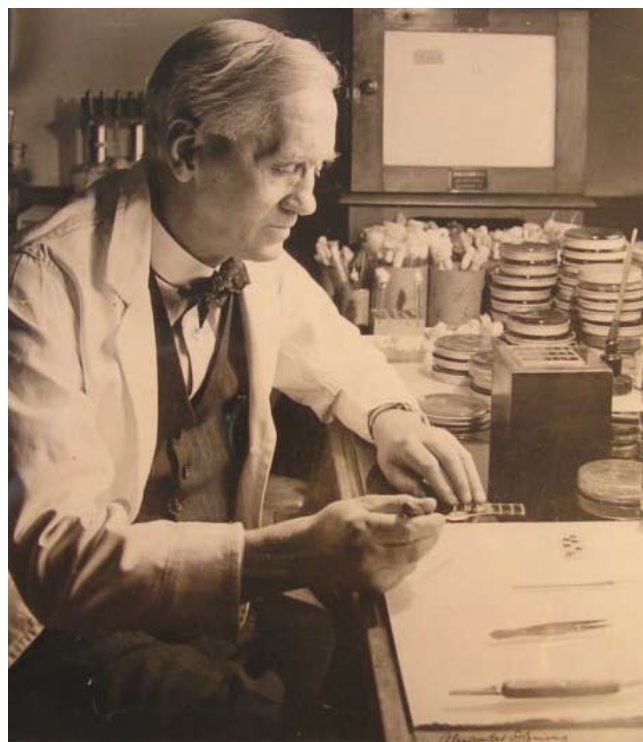


Fig 3. Signed photo of Fleming.

may be in the Pasteur Institute in Paris. The original is in the Fleming Museum in St Mary's Hospital, London.

I told my guests that I thought that the Nobel Committee had made a mistake in awarding the Prize to Fleming, Florey and Chain excluding the third member of the Oxford Team – Dr Heatley. (At that time I did not know that the Nobel Prize was never given to more than three persons). I really knew very little about Heatley and resolved to do what I should have done, probably in 1970, when Mrs Ida Edgar told me that his work had been absolutely essential in penicillin's development. Had I then carried out even a cursory investigation of his work, and written a letter about it to the British Medical Journal, Heatley may well have had his due recognition during his working life.

The book review of *The Mould in Dr Florey's Coat* in this issue of this journal⁴ is the fruit of my long delayed investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Conflict of Interest – none

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